

BRUCE ONABRAKPEYA'S HARMATTAN WORKSHOP AT AGBARHATOR: ROADMAP TO RENAISSANCE OF CONTEMPORARY ART IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Since the establishment of workshop centres in Africa in the 1940s to create a new synthesis of African modern art, there has been a wide range of artistic perceptions, creative expressions, techniques and styles. Tremendously, the importance of Nigerian artists has never been in doubt. Globally, they are acknowledged as dexterous, prolific and relevant to the cultural practices of their society. The prowess of artists has equally been outstanding in their exploits in ground breaking art traditions. However, it is from this perspective that the paper focuses on the history of Bruce Onabrakpeya's workshop experiment, his profile, what attracts the participants, the footprints of the participants; their captivating styles and themes. The mission statement: Artist growth through interaction, experiment and search had so far challenged the artists on how to confront and interpret the world of art and assist in changing it for better. The workshop promotes and develops public interest in the visual art by creating awareness for the intrinsic values of the art, particularly by the African arts and their benefits to the larger society. Bruce Onabrakpeya's status is as a result of over thirty years of creative toil and stress, of consistent search and persistent research, of experimentation and discovery, of the articulation and spousal of philosophic tenets, which are pivoted on pragmatic humanism. The main thrust of this paper is to look into creative engagement of Bruce Onabrakpeya and to discuss his invaluable contributions to the development of Contemporary Art in Nigeria. The content of this paper has not overruled the possibility of a universal language for art through dialogue sessions of art devotees in the workshop series.

Keywords: Onabrakpeya, Workshop, Roadmap to Renaissance, Contemporary Art,

I. INTRODUCTION

But there is a harmattan that touches my heart;
The human Harmattan
Ravaging the hearts of men."
Its clear stream now a stagnant pool.
Breeding dangerous reptiles.
The mind grows moribund.
Reason slumbers and begets monsters.

And creativity dies a natural death.
But the young-old Onabrakpeya says No to this malaise!
He finds and administers an anti-retroviral Harmattan drugs.
To cure this creative atrophy
Instantly gains global recognition.
Artists and Artistes at heart far and near converge.
In this peaceful idyllic terrain
To express through myriad media stories of self and society.
And re-shape their dreams
To learn anew, borrowing from their Kinsmen
And to expand their boxes-in horizon

Okujor, O. (2004)

The above poem cited at one of the workshop series refers to exotic feast of the uninterrupted creative activities in ensuring a new carved image in the artistic terrain. The harmattan workshop at Agbarha-Otor, an annual event which is brought into existence is the brain-child of Bruce Onabrakpeya, Nigeria's foremost print-maker, a prominent member of the Zaria Art Society and a major motivating factor in the Society of Nigerian Artist, whose untiring involvement continues to ensure the success of the workshop and whose experience in group activities provides useful guide to the participants" (Ikpakronyi, S. 2001). Concerning the genesis of the workshop and its activities, the earliest experimental workshop centre, according to Fosu (1986), dates back to 1940s through the channel of the Europeans expatriates. The essence of their establishment was to create a new synthesis of African modern art. Notable workshop centres are Ori-Olokun established in 1968 at Ile-Ife, Mbari-Mbayo Workshop centre established in 1962 in Osogbo, harmattan workshop centre Agbarha-Otor established in 1997. These workshop centres invariably gave birth to wide range of artists' expressions, techniques and styles. The intellectual depths of artists are appreciated with the breaking of art traditions and exhibitions of their artistic prowess. There is a revolution for the understanding of visual art which stimulates the creativity in younger generation of Nigeria artists.

A group of artists emerged from the first Harmattan workshop at Agbarha-Otor: OTU-EWENA in 1998, with Bruce Onabrakpeya as its first President, Mike Omoighe, Vice-President and Barrett Akpokabayan, General Secretary. Otu-Ewena means Art in Uhrobo language. This group of artists is actually the body of the Harmattan workshop. The participants at the first workshop were given automatic membership of the group. The group, having come together from the background of a workshop, is guided by the workshop philosophy and the sole responsibility of the sustenance of the workshop lies on the shoulder of the group. Ever since the maiden edition in 1998, the membership has grown tremendously in subsequent workshop experiments and has remained a global phenomenon. Omoighe, M. (2001) says "the coming of Harmattan workshop was like an oasis in the desert to artists". "It was like a first rainfall after a long dry season for most artists and art lovers." (Uhacheme, O. 2001). Ozolua also posits that "The Harmattan workshop, by all standards had gone into history as the first of its kind in the country."

II. OBJECTIVES OF AGBARHA-OTOR WORKSHOP

The objectives are unity of purpose towards the search of raw materials, new techniques and the ability to tackle common issues, be it global or local, bounded by the love for a common interest and pursuit; involvement of members in various artistic activities which evolve into a considerable initiative in the modern visual scene, art promotion beyond the mere selling of art works to draw from our heritage-folklore and environment, to carry out experiments and research in Art of various kinds and to encourage members to work in various media. Considering the Starved contemporary Nigerian Art scene and the fact that military rule has systematically suffocated creative Art landscape in Nigeria, the workshop group had incredibly built a roadmap that brought revival to contemporary art in Nigeria. The participants had been able to develop concepts from theoretical frameworks as well as practically demonstrate the unlimited boundaries of the visual arts. The Harmattan workshop therefore serves as a nexus between theory and practice, thereby serving as a critical mass for the Nigerian creative ferment. UdoUdoma, E.(2004).

The workshop series bring together people of diverse ethnic background, academic standing and practical experience to share ideas. It also seeks to prevent artists from being stagnant but instead helps them to

continue to produce works that are relevant to the society. Oyelola, P. (2006), in her perspective, sees the Harmattan workshop as a tribute and indeed a triumph of the capacity of art forms to bridge and enhance the understanding of different ethnic groups and cultures. It also shows demonstrable evidence that art work can often be a strategic access that bridges friendship into various cultures, thereby fostering understanding of people and their values. The Harmattan workshop has always been featuring works like printmaking, sculpture, Jewelry, Painting, textile, mixed media, drawings, water colour, oil painting and ceramics. It receives pool of participants from nooks and crannies of the country and even beyond. The participants ranging from lecturers in higher institutions as well as secondary and primary school teachers, full time practicing artists as well as some artists with very limited experiences in their various fields of endeavours. They always come to ideas and this is the beauty of the workshop. The workshop truly represents a communal effort to foster and sustain artists while the experiments are punctuated by formal meetings, classes in any of the medium and free meals. After the meal, artists come for seminar and discussion. Inspired by residency programmes in the United States, the Harmattan workshop provides Nigerians and any other artists who would like to join the group, an all too rare opportunity to learn new techniques, experiments with new media or simply concentrate on working for two weeks without any distractions (Borgatti, J. 2003). It is the practice at the workshop to organize lectures in the evening where academic papers are delivered. The papers present issues on Africa Art form, Art and Technology, Nigerian Contemporary Art, Style, Trends, Events, Plight of Nigerian Artists and many more. This is done to broaden the mind of the participants and to widen the horizon of the artists in all sphere of livelihood, especially on the concept of Art. It is a sort of interactive session to rob mind and brainstorm on issues that are artist friendly. The Crème-de-la crème of Nigerian artists have one time or the other attended the workshop. This has added a new dimension to the visual art process and revealed that visual artists are not mere craftsmen with skill in conceptualizing pictorial form but also gifted in verbal expression (Udoma, Ibid).

The organizers of the annual workshop have always been coming with themes for every event. For instance, the first edition in 1989 had Out Owena (A group of skilled workers). In 1999 focus was on Man and society (the activities of man on the planet earth). In 2004, the theme was Installation is Art, Art is Installation. There were interaction, inspiration and expression. "It aimed at developing the arts, particularly the visual art. The last event was dedicated to the art gurus: Yusuf Grillo and Wole Soyinka who were both 70 in 2004. Their life long devotion to the arts has exerted tremendous influence on several generations in Nigeria especially in the areas of arts and education. The 2006 edition focused on Ibibie Alphabets and Ideograms (a package of the signs and symbols found in Onabrakpeya's paintings, prints and drawings).

The 2007 edition, under the theme Ogwa Art and Architecture II, was different in organization with the introduction of new school of thought. The architectural dimension widens the scope and expanded the horizon. The new approach is planned to underscore the gradual international spread of the event with the invitation of American Blacksmith John Crawford and Emmanuel Enifrom Germany and some other artists from Africa. This paper will lose its flavor if it fails to acknowledge the Patriarch behind the mask. The identity of Bruce Onabrakpeya should actually be given prominence for illumination of vital points. Who is Bruce Onabrakpeya? What are his magical wands for creative ingenuity?

All hail Bruce,
The communal patriarch of Agbarha Otor
For all who allows themselves to be touched
By this creative genius enshrouded in humility
who turns sounding brass to pure Gold"
(Okujor, Odey Op. Cit)

The creative exuberance of this Patriarch is given due accolade by one of his faithful disciples. As a matter of fact, it is not out of proportion to conclude that no artistic ministration has ever influenced Nigerian artists like that of Bruce Onabrakpeya. He has greatly touched the heart of hundreds of Nigerian modern artists positively. No wonder a number of scholars dedicate their scholastic energy studying, mastering, digesting and writing about him and his works.

III. BRUCE ONABRAKPEYA'S PROFILE

Bruce Onabrakpeya was born in 1932 at Agbarha-Otor, Delta State. He is one of the most prolific among the Zaria Rebels. He is also the most notable printmaking artist in Africa. He graduated from the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology (now Ahmadu Bello University) in 1962. He attended printmaking workshops to learn various aspects of printmaking techniques. From the studio he was able to evolve series

of experiments which led to innovation of unique etching methods. Some of the techniques he developed are Bronzed lino relief techniques; he calls this "low relief sculptural assemblage of motifs". Another technique is called plastocast: this allows plates to be cast in plaster. Others are linoengravings and plastography that were invented as a result of Acid Accident. His studio accommodates upcoming artists for industrial attachment, artist –in- residence and research and documentation programmes. Ko-ko-koapataki i se gbeka-ka-kairokome meaning as the insurmountable structure of a rock is intimidating, so as the awesome, creative exploit of Bruce Onabrakpeya is unprecedented in the history of Contemporary Art in Nigeria. He has participated in several national and international and group exhibitions. In 1998, he began the Harmattan Workshop series which have now become an annual event. In 2000, his name appeared in the prestigious Cambridge Biographical Centre who's who among 1000 intellectuals of the 21st century. He is a fellow of the Society of Nigerian Artists and in 2002, he received the accolade: MFR, from the president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Atari Ajanakuiiseruomodeme meaning as an elephant's head is not a child luggage, Bruce Onabrakpeya remains a Patriarch in Nigerian Art dynasty. More of art flavours and aroma of this beautiful Patriarch will be relinquished in the course of this paper.

IV. EXOTIC FEAST

The experimentation in Agbarha-Otor workshop is quite unprecedented in the history of workshop in Nigeria. This is through the fundamental workshop mission framework of "Artistic growth through INTERACTION, EXPERIMENTS AND SEARCH". This roadmap ignites standardization and functionality with an uninterrupted mass appraisal from Art World. Here, there is a wide opportunity for artists to improve themselves by sharing ideas, acquiring skills in all ramifications, and opening opportunities to experiments and materials. The workshop promotes and develops public interest in the visual art by creating awareness for the intrinsic values of the art (particularly by the African arts and their benefits to the larger society.) This is a big surprise from the Art paradigm of Bruce Onabrakpeya has brought high sense of fulfillment to modern art while the exemplary creative ingenuity he demonstrates has continued to amaze the participants of the annual events. Jegede, D. (1992) gives an answer to this when he says Onabrakpeya's international status is the result of thirty years of creative toil and stress of consistent search and persistent philosophic tenets which are pivoted on pragmatic humanism. Every participant at the workshop learns one or two things from the Patriarch's enormous creative ingenuity that is enshrouded in inspiration, passion, content, skills and critical judgment of art works. From total reliance on experimentation with materials, participants make lemonade from lemon, Brass is turned to Gold, refuse wastes are transformed to substance, drugs are procured for creative atrophy, spirits are lifted, stagnant pool evaporates, creativity resurrects and blind eyes are turned on goldmine. Convergence of artists in contemporary terms: Renowned Artists, Colossus, Art Critics, Writers, Curators, Appreciators converge at the annual event to present strong feeling of spiritual kinship and brotherhood; there is cohesion needed in art environment to procure a unified front especially against government's marginalization of the Art Sector. The experiment is a way of revitalizing and repositioning of the sector to effectively arouse consciousness in the socio-economic frontline.

Furthermore, the workshop exploits art mainstream to make a statement in the political terrain. The avenue provides strategies for national development as well as utilization of the strength for development. Some of the political issues that have been addressed at the workshop are the Niger Delta crises. There is a launch of awareness and consciousness of people towards art in a way that will serve as diversionary measures from youth restiveness in the region. This is delivered through revelation of the potentials in developing the talents of the local people drawn to the pool of manpower (human resources) in the field of art for national development. On this, Onabrakpeya (2007) says, in addition to offering reliable source of livelihood to the people involved in the programme, the skill acquisition through art can make restiveness of the youth in the Niger Delta a thing of the past.

V. STYLES AND THEMES OF WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS

Virtually every movement in the art world is present in the participant's themes at the workshop. The characteristics are Cubism, Abstraction, Expressionism, Impressionism, Surrealism, Dadaism, Realism, Terracotta, Installation Traditions, Collagraphy, Monoprint, Additive Plastography, Batik, Tie and Dye, Steatite, Limestone, Marble and Stone sculptures, Wood, Raffia, Beads, bells, Cowries Rope and Screen Printing. A work titled Tales created by Duke Asidere, oil on canvas, is rendered in cubism. The work appears naïve unlike another cubism produced by Kunle Adeyemi titled Opomulero and Dance. Other works that are professionally enriched in cubism are First encounter with Harmattan and working hard executed by Jumailbeagbazi and Oluwole Oromole respectively. In Dadaism, that is scholarly referred to as mixed media, creativity is stretched to the maximum. The ingenuity of the artists is discovered in the juxtaposition of improvised items to attract emphasis of discovery. Notable artists in this direction speak better language on humanity with Dadaism. The icon at 70 by Nurudeen Odebiyi immortalizes Wole Soyinka. Aggression in

pasting symbols while working is shown by UdubuisiOhananonu in untitled and Okorukuo Francis Untitled 1 shows perfect mixed media. A master in this technique is Stephen Folarinmi. Some of his mixed media works are And we all gathered, They were once her and Our father's Door. The flair in these media is in the effective marriage of Africa traditions, themes and concepts.

Impressionism or Illuminism where source of light is given prominence at a glance is another prominent tendency in the workshop. Works on stand with this style are Best Ochigbo's Sunny Day, Block I Harmattan workshop and Folarinmi Stephen's In my time. Hakeem Balogun's Ray of Hope is also an impressionistic painting on display at the workshop. The works replicate Claude Monet's approach in handling impression. Very little works portend Realism especially with the feeling that they fail to address the deserved liberty of medium of expression. Notwithstanding, a work like Journey to Belgium tries to showcase realism in Gustere Courtbet's style. Surrealism depicts dreams, fantasies, memories and visual paradox. It examines systematic exploration of the hidden region of human psyche. It also sorts to express the metaphysical, the strange and the mystical dream world, using the style the artists exchange forms of expression that has been considered hallucinatory aberrant. The thematic bombardment of this movement unconsciously activates art paradigm called installation, a cyclic evolutionary historical phenomenon of ancient Africa art techniques. This is refined and repackaged and integrated into modern artistic engagements. It is also a volatile territory whereby the assemblage is only restricted to a selected few in the art community. African traditional shrines evoke some contempt in the present society as artists continue to present them as great source of knowledge. Communal shrines in such areas as the Yoruba, Efik, Urobo, Igbo societies and sacred spots receive some scholarly discoveries in movement formation. Installations of Bruce Onabrakpeya, a pivoter of pragmatic humanism and the founder of Harmattan workshop, beat people's imagination, he says that installation as contemporary art, took one of its inspiration from the concept of the shrine".

One of his works, Otieko—(An imaginary statue of a forest guard) was produced using plastography method. The guard is heavily armed with protective fetish materials. Another work Aro Oloku Emetore is a metal foils relief piece while Bridge Across Time is an assemblage of foil, electrical gadgets, beads, slides ropes and other accessories to engender psycho-spiritual feelings. In Hunters in the forest of spirit, another experiment on installation, Onabrakpeya shows an impression of seven daring hunters who on the order of their king went on a long journey to a mountain refers to as Lagbondo. Scavenging in lost paradise is another celebrated installation. The expression in this work is very rich; showing the heritage of his artistic traditions. Apart from the Yoruba myth, other statements on contemporary issues are drawn from Urhobo shrine installation; depicting structure of ancestral shines in Urhobo land. Bruce Onabrakpeya is not left alone in these experimentations on installation. Nelson Edewor, a versatile and prolific sculptor, also made attempt to combine the positive elements of modern life with old to create what he calls the neo-traditional art. His work like My people's blood for cake is a masterpiece in Mortar. The concept is all about exhibiting the Niger Delta's cry and the National enjoyment at the expense of some other people's sacrifice. Other works are The Burden Bearer, A monster is strangling us and The hand that giveth. Their contents speak volume of the revolutionary cry in Niger Delta against marginalization. His effort presents an art that relates to contemporary experience without losing its identity. Nelson Edewor, with heavy Urhobo influence on his works, is a treasure discovered at the workshop. His works are perfect reminiscences of ancient ancestral shrines. One of his outstanding works, The child must be king speaks metaphorically on the likelihood that he will be the next heir apparent to the throne, at least, for the correlation factor and the paripassu exponent of the Patriarch. Gitter, T. (2004) says the drive in installation is to exhibit the primordial instinct of man as collector of objects for visual manipulation and the thought of installation as a product of different detachable components that could be collected individually.

In prints and textile sections, their message gave an opportunity for greater reflection. For instance, in printmaking section, Veral Nwaokokoh produced celebration at Dusk, Izah Elizabeth had Eduwegu, Kunle Oshundina had Family meeting, Shade Thompson had Portrait of An Grillo at 70. Some works in monoprint show Emmanuel Etse name's Untitled; Adeyemi Adeyeye's Dancing Panorama, Bridget Nwanze's Born Again and Ighalo Mathew's Fertility. In the area of Collagraphy are Ufua Godwin's Survival John Sampson's Farm House, Okujor Odeh's Meeting Point, Elizabeth Izah's Sleeping Beauty and others. Mathew Ighalo's Who the cap fits is rendered in Additive Plastography as well as Shade Thompson's Eghwrujakpor's Untitled, Oluwaseyin Benedict's Gbedu Vase, John Agberia's Onorogun, Klem Emodah's Pot with patterns to mention but a few. The experimentation stone carving is highly fascinating considering the durability of messages, making images, inscriptions, tomb stoning and weapons. Some of the works in this direction are Sullayman Taiwo's Burden; Adeyemi Adeyeye's Guitarist; Godwin Onabrakpeya's Man of comfort; Leonard Onwugbadu's Iyalbeji. All these works show expressions for audience digest. The sculptures rendered in metal demonstrate the artists' proficiencies. Oladimeji Tirimisiyu's stete-a-tete, Harrie Bazunu's Steps in the right direction I and II; Ovbiebo Richardson's Iye (mother); Chile

Oparocha's Stand with me, Okoro's Drummer are simply fascinating while Tayeldahor's Untitled I and II are rendered in metal, fabric and colour and metal and wood respectively.

The styles, themes and techniques in sculpture erupt like earthquake with one conspicuous movement called Iboism, which is born out of Bamboo application and exploitation as a medium of expression. Those works in this direction are Ayandepo Ayanlodun's United We Stand, Alagbawia and Complete Silence. Peju Olayiwola displays prodigy in metal works such as jewelry and metal casting. Her works display Experimentation, Illumination and Inspiration. Her wealth of experience in this field is overwhelmingly displayed in Romid Eyes (Earring and Pendant) and Snail (Earring and Pendant); produced with Gold. Ofonime Nyang's Ima (Earring and Pendant) is in gold and brass while Helen Uhinmargbo's Earring and Pendant is another Gold product. Series of other pendants that are simply creative are also on display at the centre.

VI. SPONSORSHIP

National Gallery of Art has been very much supportive in providing exhibition space for the workshop exhibition on yearly basis as well as purchasing some of the works. Most of the Harmattan Workshop Programmes and the publications of Agbarha-Otor Harmattan workshop editions are made possible with the kind support of Ford Foundation and Bruce Onabrakpeya's Foundation. Corporate bodies also support the production of the catalogues through advertising. Individuals, Philanthropists and Non-Governmental Organizations have been showing interests in hospitality and provision of accommodations for participants and even spiritual supports for the care for the participants. Ibru Ecumenical centre and some other neighbours have been tremendous in ushering in financial, moral and spiritual supports.

VII. CONCLUSION

The paper has so far established the authenticity of the assertion of Dele Jegede concerning Bruce Onabrakpeya when he says that his status is as a result of over thirty years of creative toil and stress, of consistent search and persistent research, of experimentation and discovery, of the articulation and spousal of philosophic tenets, which are pivoted on pragmatic humanism. As a matter of fact, Onabrakpeya's through enviable reputation, inspiration and creative ingenuity has excellently nurtured and repositioned modern art. His laudable imprints in art ministrations, creative commentaries and engagements of art and artists erupt the quest for the development of a better society where order and beauty are greatly sorted after. The paper has so far been able to express the benefits, the aims and objectives or rather the unique gains of the Harmattan workshop; the brain child of Bruce Onabrakpeya. The mission statement: Artist growth through interaction, experiment and search had so far challenged the artists on how to confront and interpret the world of art and assist in changing it for better. Apart from the fact that the creative tendencies so far discussed in the paper have succeeded in laying precedence for the present and upcoming generation of artists they have equally established the fact that the workshop represents a significant landmark in the transformation of the contemporary African Art.

The content of this paper has not overruled the possibility of a universal language for art through dialogue sessions of art devotees in the workshop series. In a nutshell, the paper tries to see the workshop achieving the underlisted Exotic feast with her constitution: reinvigoration of knowledge; nurturing of a tradition of excellence and promoting creative tendencies through unique media; development of human intellect and natural characters and images; rallying point for experimentation and discovery; extension of the boundaries of art; charting a new direction in art; heightening people's consciousness in art' learning coherent framework for the understanding of art traditions; motivation of artistic sensibilities; evoking modern art revolution; representation of a communal efforts to arouse enthusiasm; discovery of hidden treasures; creation of avenue to fight the government against marginalization of art sector and to see the need to fund it; creation of competitive environments for art growth through exhibitions, research, interactions, expressions and installations.

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